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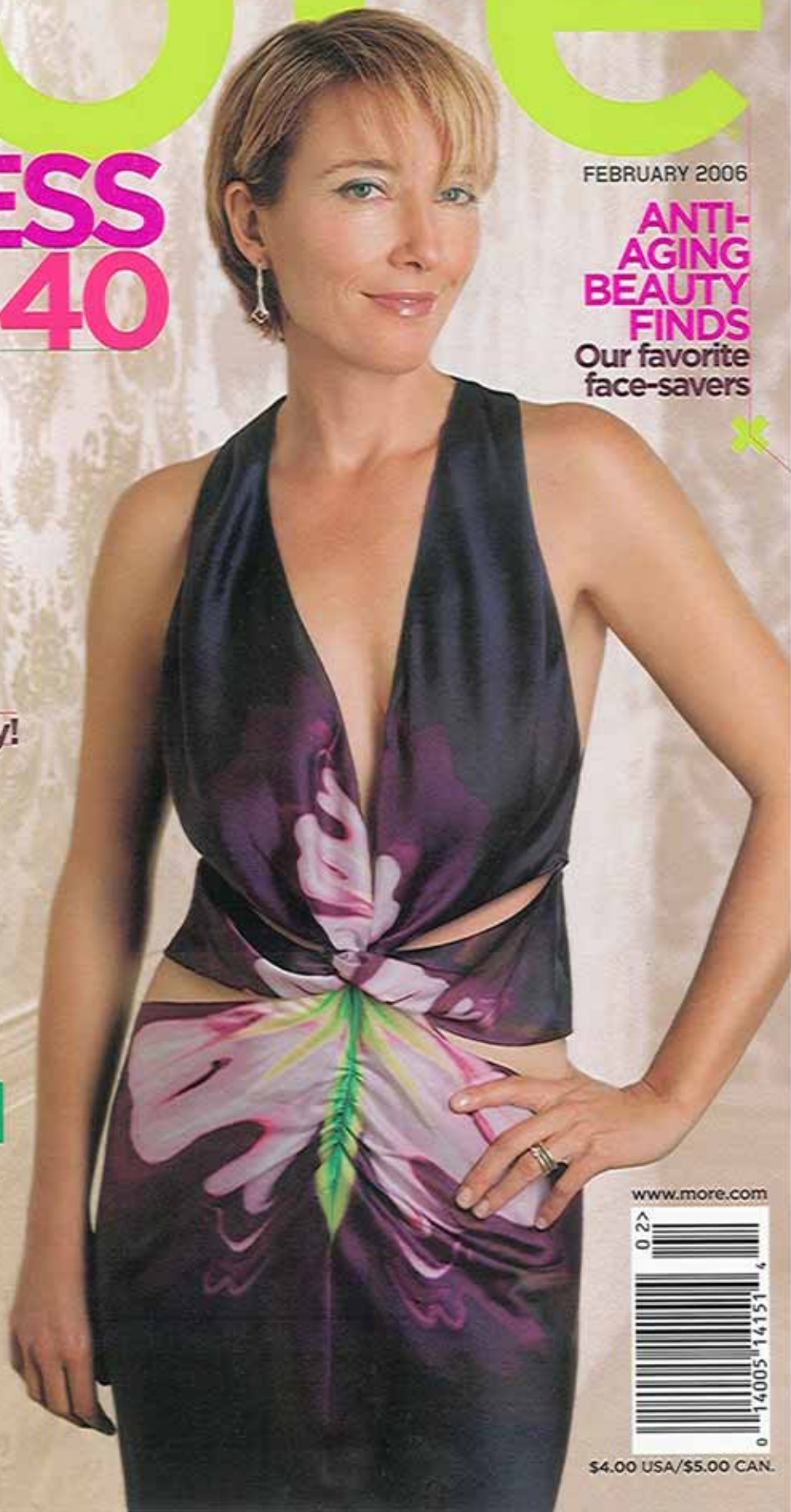
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TRAVEL



FOR THE LOVE OF  
**FLORENCE**

MARY BLY fell in love with the city and her Florentine husband at the same time. Here, the best-selling romance novelist—also known as Eloisa James—takes us on an insider's tour of her home away from home.

Photography by ANDREA FAZZARI



LEFT "The Ponte Vecchio, or Old Bridge, is heartbreakingly beautiful; I like to visit early in the morning, so I'm not swamped by tourists."  
RIGHT "Jean de Boulogne's *Rape of the Sabine Woman*, in the Loggia dei Lanzi, is a glorious twist of drama, from the figure crouching in despair to the towering victor."

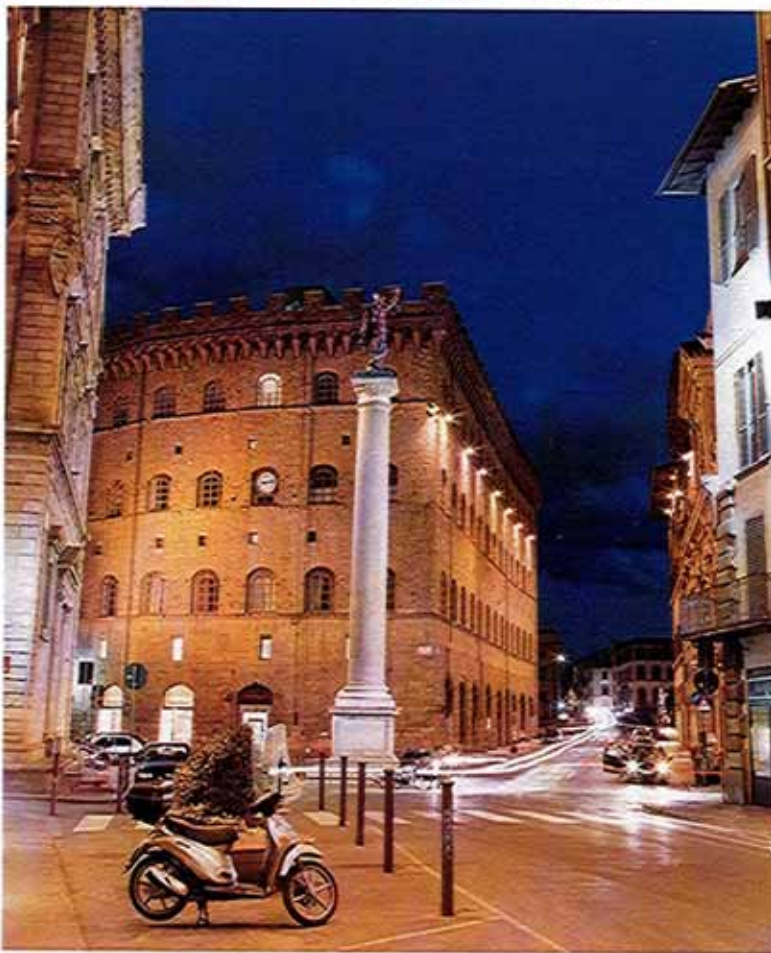


# I first arrived in Florence

as a graduate student in love and learned the city through my now husband's eyes: the *macelleria* where his mother buys meat, the shop where his aunt finds tassels, the Sicilian restaurant where the errors on the check are always in their favor. Alessandro pointed out the pool where he won a citywide swimming championship and the park where, it is said, the most beautiful transvestites outside Paris gather. We spent hours walking the streets in its medieval center, which rings with the sound of laughter and music.

In novels, lovers are the connoisseurs of travel, forever drifting down Venetian canals as the heroine trails her fingers in the water (risking salmonella and instant death). Surely, as a part-time romance novelist, I should be describing that Florence to you. The Florence of lovers, of Romeos, Lotharios and honeymoons. I could weave an elaborate brocade of love: I've come here every summer since I took up with my Dante scholar of a husband, who happens to have been born in this city and is a *cavaliere*, or Italian knight.

But although the Florence I discovered was indeed one of dusky corners designed for surreptitious kisses, the city I'll describe is half mine and half Alessandro's. Half his because I never would have guessed that the Santa Maria Novella pharmacy is a pharmacy—it looks like a hotel—except that his mother is addicted to its lotions. Half mine because Alessandro buries himself in the archives of the Biblioteca Nazionale during the day, and since I travel back and forth to New York, I have yet to make a really close friend in Florence. Oddly enough, this has turned into a blessing, teaching me how to take myself joyfully out for lunch, admire a fifteenth-century statue without a friend's prompting, and buy a pair of Ferragamos without being told that the buckles make my feet look huge. It's the privilege of age to trust your own opinion, and it can be intoxicating to head out into a foreign city by yourself.



ABOVE "My children adore the colorful candies sold by the handful at Scudieri, a caffè on Piazza di San Giovanni." RIGHT "La Giustizia, or Justice, watches over Piazza Santa Trinita—and all the American students who use her as a rendezvous point."

## In Search of Deliciously Feminine Finery

Every year when we arrive in Florence, I take a day to wander the city without thought of deadlines or e-mail. And I no longer spend the morning queuing for museums—I start with shopping and work my way up to cultural enrichment. The MaxMara store has exquisite antique frescoes of Biblical women on the second-floor stair landing; the salespeople in Yves Saint Laurent will coo to you in four languages. But I buy three things in Florence: bras, nightgowns and shoes.



There's nothing particularly mysterious about American bras, barring the curious fact that almost 90 percent turn out to be uncomfortable. One shop that I love for *moda intima* is Bisoli on Via degli Speciali, which carries La Perla. (Their bras won't show, won't slip, and will give you the exuberant chest of a breastfeeding mother.) Bisoli is nothing more than a tiny room with a counter, a good deal of dark wood and a wall of white boxes. The saleswoman discreetly eyes your chest and lifts a lid to display bras made of pleated black silk. Another box reveals a cherry-colored bra

**ABOVE** "We lived for six months just behind the outdoor gallery of the Uffizi, so we often heard the melodic duo who sing Simon & Garfunkel songs there every night." **LEFT** "Here's me and my husband, Alessandro, at our favorite restaurant, La Giostra."





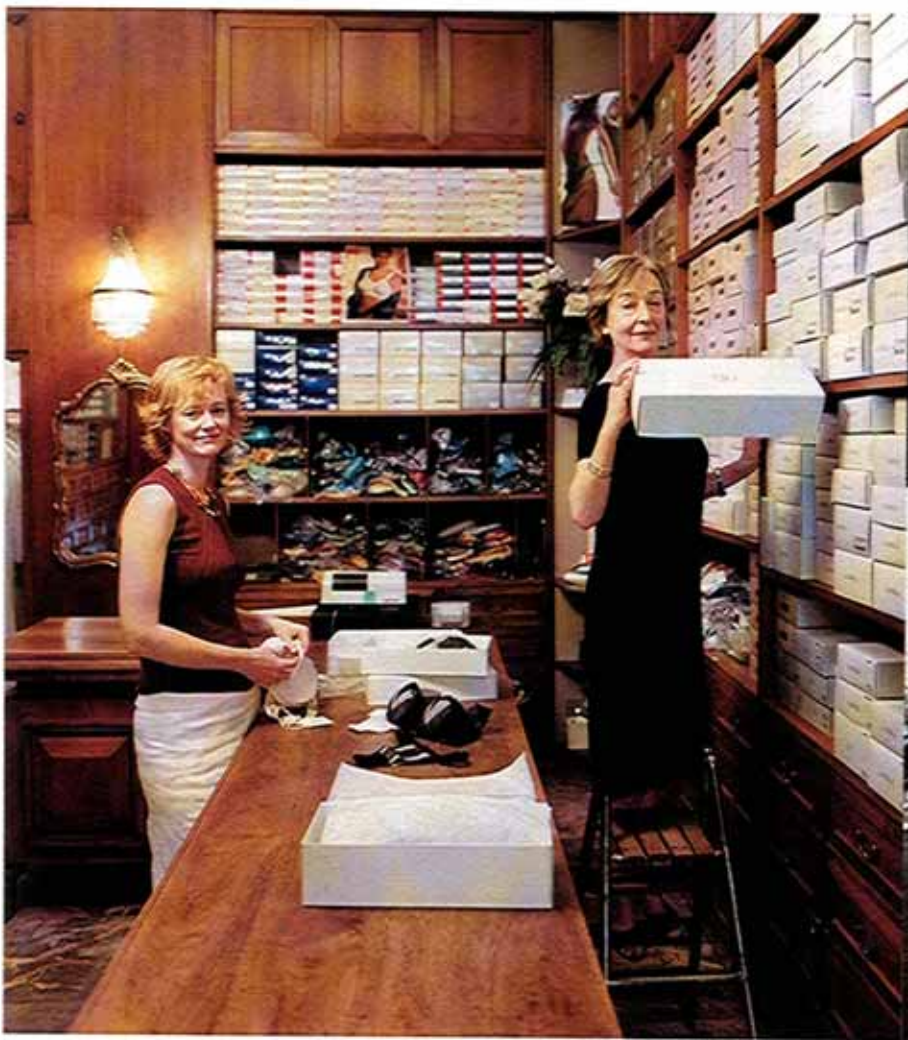
OPPOSITE The majestic dining room of the Ferragamo family's headquarters, Palazzo Spini-Ferroni. THIS PAGE "I loved being invited to wander the corridors of the palazzo—in Ferragamo's, of course."

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT The thirteenth-century cathedral, the Duomo. Chicken cacciatore is a must-try staple at Caffè Italiano. "There's something about the pristine white boxes at Bisoli, each hiding a bra of silk and lace, that makes me feel lustful." OPPOSITE Taccini and one of his coveted plates.

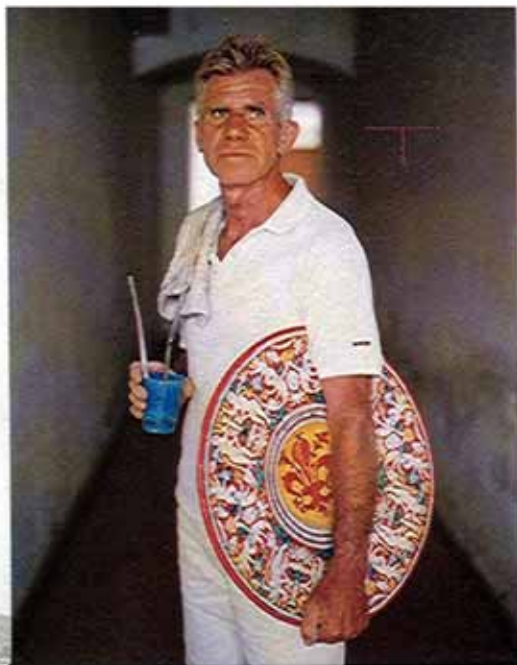
swathed in translucent ribbon. This is the kind of store that once terrified me. But that's the joy of being over 40: You can waltz into intimidating stores, trusting that a sparse command of language, a credit card and a pair of breasts are enough to buy a bra.

Just a street or two away from Bisoli is a store that sells handmade nightwear. One of my greatest shocks, coming to Italy as a bride, was discovering just how much Florentines iron. They actually hire ironing ladies. My mother-in-law likes her underwear pressed, her sheets folded into perfect squares and tied together with matching ribbons. After we had been married a few years, Alessandro confessed to a longing for ironed sheets, and we added an ironing lady to our cleaning lady. Then I discovered Ferrini's soft pleated nightgowns, which never need pressing. They come in every style, from jaunty black-and-white stripes to drifting pale pink, and are adorned with superb *buratto* lace.

Florentines are positively gluttonous when it comes to magnificent trimmings.







Passamaneria Toscana has stood behind the stalls surrounding the San Lorenzo market for years; my husband's great-aunt bought her curtains from the owner's father in the 1930s. Passamaneria tapestries are justly famous—even walking through the store and eyeing their ruby pillows and gem-colored tassels is satisfying.

Florence is, of course, also famous for its ceramics. But the truth is that Florentines do not buy elaborate painted plates and bowls in their own city. They head 45 minutes east to a little *villaggio* called Montelupo Fiorentino, where the ceramists

live and work. My husband and I started going there years ago and fell in love with an artist named Eugenio Taccini, who paints with traditional Renaissance colors and designs. We used to be able to buy small plates, with wild medieval creatures curling around their own tails, for five dollars. But Taccini has become president of the Arts and Crafts Association of Florence, so now you'll pay considerably more.

Should you be in Montelupo toward the end of June, the town throws a Festa della Ceramica, in which artisans in Renaissance tights and hats with arcing feathers re-create modern and fourteenth-century designs in the town's center. No matter when you are there, wander up the hill to the austere medieval castle and chapel that overlook the olive trees surrounding the village. Then treat yourself to some *gelato artigianale*, or handmade ice cream, from the store in front of the boat-shaped fountain in the piazza.

## Of Must-See Museums, Italian Men and Marilyn Monroe

Americans have taken their national coffee shop, Starbucks, and made it into an extension of the workplace. In an Italian caffè, especially one with chairs spilling onto the piazza, to open a laptop would be an insult. Rivoire, on the corner of Piazza della Signoria, is the spot to people-watch and engage in shameless flirtation. It began as a *fabbrica di cioccolata*, which means the hot chocolate is wonderful. But Rivoire also offers a number of cheerful pink drinks with an alcohol kick. Scudieri, on Piazza di San Giovanni, is the kind of caffè where you stand at the bar and toss back an espresso; Rivoire is a place to sit and dream, or eye the statues lining the piazza. Our two children are particularly fond of Cellini's version of Medusa's head, freshly cut off by Perseus.

A note about sitting by yourself: Italian men think American women are delightful. The distinguished man in sunglasses sitting opposite you with his *La Stampa* is quite likely to approach. In my experience, Italian pickup lines often involve footwear. So when he takes off his glasses and gives you a little crooked smile, he's quite likely to mention the fact that the buckles on your shoes are exquisite. As well they should be, since they're Ferragamos.

You've probably noticed that my Florence doesn't include much talk of museums. One of my clearest memories of college was viewing the *Mona Lisa* in the company of 100 jostling tourists at the Louvre. The antidote to that unappetizing experience is choosing a small museum and making a leisurely visit. I recommend the Galleria dell'Accademia. Head over midmorning, while the hordes of teenagers are standing in line at the Uffizi. Walk briskly past Michelangelo's *David* and sit before his *Four Slaves*. Look at how they emerge from stone, each bowed under the weight of a massive block of marble, each blending back into the stone that defines and traps them.

But to return to Ferragamo: The flagship store is in Palazzo Spini-Feroni, a medieval city palace created by Pope Boniface VIII's banker in 1290. Upstairs is the Salvatore Ferragamo Museum. My favorite display includes prototypes of Katharine Hepburn's shoes from *The Philadelphia Story*. There's something magical about Ferragamos, the very thing that had

### SHOPPING

**MaxMara**  
Via dei Tornabuoni, 89r  
011-39-055-214-133

**Yves Saint Laurent**  
Via dei Tornabuoni, 29  
055-284-040

**Bisoli**  
Via degli Speciali, 12r  
055-211-395

**Ferrini Firenze**  
Biancheria  
Via Calimala, 5r  
055-287-595

**Passamaneria Toscana**  
Piazza San Lorenzo, 12r  
055-214-670

**Eugenio Taccini**  
Le Ceramiche del Borgo  
Montelupo  
057-151-8856

### MUSEUMS AND CAFFÈS

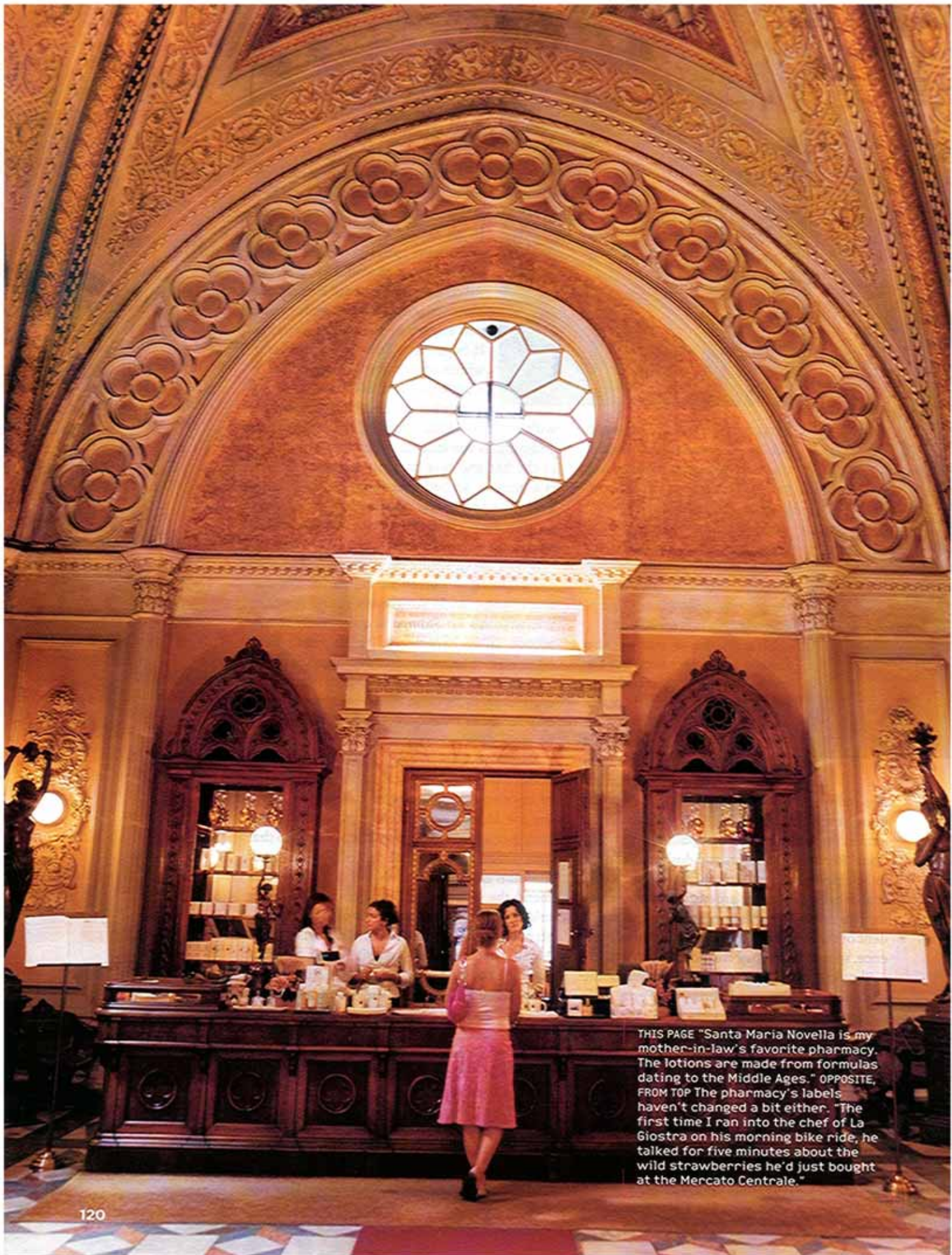
**Rivoire**  
Piazza della Signoria, 5r  
055-214-412

**Scudieri**  
Piazza di San Giovanni, 19r  
055-210-733

**Galleria dell'Accademia**  
Via Ricasoli, 60  
055-238-8609

**Ferragamo**  
Palazzo Spini-Feroni  
Via dei Tornabuoni, 14r  
055-292-123

**L. Vettori**  
Ponte Vecchio, 37  
055-282-2030



THIS PAGE "Santa Maria Novella is my mother-in-law's favorite pharmacy. The lotions are made from formulas dating to the Middle Ages." OPPOSITE, FROM TOP The pharmacy's labels haven't changed a bit either. "The first time I ran into the chef of La Giostra on his morning bike ride, he talked for five minutes about the wild strawberries he'd just bought at the Mercato Centrale."



Marilyn Monroe always buying the same Ferragamo court shoe with a four-inch heel. Wander downstairs and buy yourself a pair: The spring collection features wedges with swirled heels and sandals adorned with clusters of beads.

When you leave, turn left toward the Arno and walk over the Ponte Vecchio. The old bridge is lined with small shops—try L. Vettori for marvelous gold jewelry. One thing my husband most regrets is that we bought our wedding rings in Princeton, where he was teaching; all true Florentines buy their wedding bands on the Ponte Vecchio. Precisely halfway across the bridge is an odd memorial surrounded by a wrought-iron gate festooned with small locks, each engraved or painted with two names. After Florentines marry, they go to the Ponte Vecchio and “lock” their love onto the bridge. The authorities, no respecters of *amore*, file off the locks once a month, but if you’re lucky, you’ll see a bride in full regalia dancing down the bridge, her veil flying behind her.

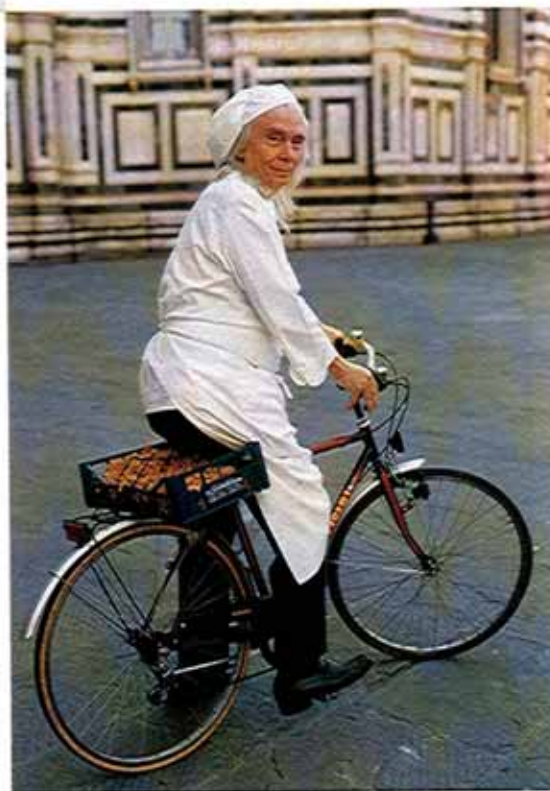
Another wonderful—if rarely open—museum is the Corridoio Vasariano (Vasari’s Corridor), a gallery of the Uffizi that runs across the length of the Ponte Vecchio. One notable painting is Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes*; the violence of the painting speaks to the Renaissance painter’s tragic life. Grand Duke Cosimo I built the Corridoio in 1565 so the Medici family could travel from the Palazzo Vecchio to their private palace, Palazzo Pitti, across the river, without touching the ground.

Just talking about museums makes me hungry. At Caffè Italiano, on Via Isola delle Stinche,

you can linger over your pasta surrounded by Italian businesswomen taking a three-hour lunch. If you don’t feel like having a long meal, make your way to San Lorenzo and the Mercato Centrale, a huge building with two floors of stalls selling everything from homemade linguini to chicken heads. Toward the back of the covered market, you’ll find a lunch counter with superb pasta. And if you want a leg of prosciutto or a kilo of dried porcini, most of the sellers in the stalls will mail it for you.

### Dinner and Slumber

Florentines spend their afternoons napping righteously, allowing them to dance into the early morning hours—and so should you. My



favorite place to stay is the Hotel Lungarno, which faces the river so you can watch the sun set on the water as boat crews make their way down that stretch. If you are traveling with small children, they will be equally delighted by the large water voles that leave a wake like miniature motorboats. The hotel’s decorations include Picassos, so you can guess at its quality. From the Cocteau Suite, you can lie in bed and survey the entirety of the Ponte Vecchio.

Another reasonably priced hotel in the historic center is Hotel Brunelleschi on Piazza Santa Elisabetta. The property is constructed out of one of Florence’s **continued on page 175**

**Corridoio Vasariano**  
Galleria degli Uffizi  
Piazzale degli Uffizi  
055-294-883

**Caffè Italiano**  
Via Isola delle  
Stinche, 11r  
055-289-368

**Mercato Centrale**  
Via dell’Ariento  
10-14

### HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS

**Hotel Lungarno**  
Borgo San  
Jacopo, 14  
055-272-64000  
lungarnohotels.com

**Hotel Brunelleschi**  
Via dei Calzaiuoli  
Piazza Santa  
Elisabetta, 3  
055-273-70  
hotelbrunelleschi.it

**Trattoria Belle  
Donne**  
Via delle Belle  
Donne, 16r  
055-238-2609

**La Giostra**  
Borgo Pinti, 12r  
055-241-341

## FOR THE LOVE OF FLORENCE

continued from page 121

few remaining medieval towers, La Pagliazza. The region used to have loads of these little towers so that feuding families could defend themselves.

One sweet place to go for dinner is Trattoria Belle Donne, on Via delle Belle Donne, or the street of beautiful women. In the Middle Ages, this was a street of women whose beauty was for sale. The dining room is decorated on the principle of excess: Minimalism has no place amid the towering displays of pomegranates, potatoes and wax fruit. The menu—dishes with a distinctly Sardinian flavor include goat and squid—is scratched on a blackboard, with no English translation. The *baccalà*, or dried cod, comes warm on a bed of lettuce and is just the sort of thing you wouldn't, and probably couldn't, make for yourself.

If you would rather have a formal Florentine dinner, make a reservation at the family-run La Giostra. The ceiling has low, dark rafters strung with thousands of tiny white lights. And the chef is particularly proud of serving dishes that go back to the time of Queen Margherita, who married into the Savoie family in the 1800s. They make a brilliant *risotto alla marinara*. The chef's son, wearing around two hundred gold bracelets, will decant a red wine for you in a ceremony befitting a princess. If you happen to rise at five o'clock in the morning, which is the best time to see the medieval cathedral, the Duomo, you may run into a wild-haired man on a bicycle; that's the chef from La Giostra, on his way to the Mercato Centrale.

When I first came to Florence as a student, I danced down its medieval streets, rejoicing at the idea of placing my feet where Dante once stood. Those streets seemed smaller and more friendly years later, when my five-year-old son spent an entire summer dragging a clanking wooden caterpillar behind him over the cobblestones. And now Florence breathes a wild freedom when I throw my BlackBerry to the side and venture out for a day on my own. **M**